

OTHER ACTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Under the Erie County Health Equity Act of 2021, the ECOHE is tasked with understanding and connecting factors that contribute to health outcomes and making recommendations for improving delivery and access to health services. In 2023, the ECOHE team assessed the potential impact of various workplace policies on health equity among employed residents of Erie County. This section reviews each of these policies through the lens of the social determinants of health (SDOH) and makes best practice recommendations for Erie County employers who value the opportunity to support ability to achieve maximum health and wellness among their employees and their families.

Review Job Descriptions for Accuracy and Equity

One best practice is to review job descriptions for accuracy and equity and revise as needed. The ECOHE revised the job description for the Project Coordinator role within the Office, removing a minimum formal education requirement of a master's degree for this position and allowing candidates with equivalent years of relevant experience to apply. As discussed in the Education domain in this report, access to formal education is not equitable for members of minority and marginalized groups. However, as discussed in the Economic Stability domain, access to employment is a key SDOH impacting the health and wellness of Erie County residents. Employers should review job descriptions to ensure that, when applicable, equivalent relevant experience is considered for job positions that do not require formal licensure or credentials. An example of wording that allows for the consideration of experience and education as minimum qualifications is:

1. Graduation from a regionally accredited or New York State registered college or university with a Master's degree and one (1) year of experience in public health, or;
2. Graduation from a regionally accredited or New York State registered college or university with a Bachelor's degree and three (3) years of experience in public health, or;
3. An Associate's degree or 60 semester credit hours from a regionally accredited or New York State registered college or university and five (5) years of experience in public health, or;
4. An equivalent combination of education and experience of as defined by the limits of 1, 2, or 3 above.

Consider Adopting or Expanding Paid Parental Leave Policies

The ECOHE analyzed the benefit of paid parental leave policies through a health equity lens. Paid parental leave policies impact the Social and Community Context and Economic Stability domains of the SDOH. Paid parental leave policies increase employee health outcomes, increase workforce diversity, and save employers money by increasing employee retention. Paid parental leave policies have the potential to protect the long-term health of employees. Research indicates that the transition to parenthood may have a critical impact on an individual's mental and physical health in midlife and beyond, and that a lack of access to protected, paid time off from employment may exacerbate any physical and mental health problems experienced during the transition to parenthood [10]. Systematic reviews conclude that paid parental leave improves maternal and infant health and decreases rates of infant mortality. One study found that the introduction of paid parental leave in five states led to a

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reduction in low birth weight and preterm births, especially for Black infants, and those who were able to take paid leave were half as likely to be re-hospitalized, as were their infants, compared to parents who were only able to take unpaid leave or no leave [11]. Studies have shown that parents who take paid parental leave are 93% more likely to be in the workforce 9 to 12 months after a child's birth than those who take no leave and that parents who took paid family leave increased their work hours by as much as 17% one to three years later [12]. Research shows that paid leave policies especially help minority women, those with less education, and unmarried women to be able to take leave when they need it [13].

Providing new parents with paid time off to care for newborn or recently adopted children contributes to healthy development, improves maternal health, and enhances families' economic security [14]. Equitable parental leave policies empower working families by decreasing the likelihood that they will have to choose between maintaining employment and growing their families. The health of children is also protected by the implementation of parental leave policies, which have been found to decrease incidence of preterm births [15, 16]. Paid parental leave during infancy has been shown to increase rates of breastfeeding, decrease incidence of preterm birth, lower prenatal stress levels, reduce infant hospitalizations, and increase parental involvement, all of which also have lasting effects on children's health [14, 17].

Available evidence indicates that paid parental leave policies of up to one year may yield health benefits for parents and children in the short and long term [17]. Employers in Erie County, including those eligible to provide New York Paid Family Leave, should consider adopting, opting in to, or expanding paid parental leave policies to increase health equity among employees and their families.

Revise Gender Identity Policies in Compliance with GENDA

In 2019, the New York State Human Rights Law was amended through the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act (GENDA) to explicitly add gender identity or expression as a protected category. Discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression is prohibited in all areas covered by the Human Rights Law [18]. Gender identity or expression means a person's actual or perceived gender-related identity, appearance, behavior, expression, or other gender-related characteristic regardless of the sex assigned to that person at birth, including, but not limited to, the status of being transgender. Unlawful discrimination based on gender identity or expression can include questions about gender identity or medical history in a job or housing interview, refusing to hire for a job or rent an apartment, terminating employment or housing, denying the use of restrooms or locker rooms, and requiring dress codes or appearance standards based on sex stereotypes.

Discrimination and stigma related to gender identity and expression fall within the Social and Community Context domain of the SDOH and can negatively impact health and health outcomes, and access to an affirming workplace falls under the Economic Stability domain. In 2023, the ECOHE

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reviewed Erie County's Gender Identity Policy and made recommendations through an equity lens and pursuant to the Human Rights Law. Employers in Erie County should consider adopting similar policies or revising existing policies to ensure compliance with the Human Rights Law and to further health equity among employees.

Create or Update Workplace Lactation Policies

The Erie County Office of Health Equity (ECOHE) manages Breastfeeding, Chestfeeding, and Lactation Friendly Erie County across Erie County, certifying worksites as safe and welcoming environments for employees who choose to lactate when they return to work. Breastfeeding or chestfeeding helps combat risk factors for certain health conditions in people who breastfeed or chestfeed and their babies [19]. Human milk provides unique nutrients and antibodies that help protect babies from diseases such as ear infections, lower respiratory infections and diarrhea, and decrease the risk for asthma, diabetes, and obesity later in life. For the lactating parent, breastfeeding or chestfeeding lowers the risk for certain cancers and diabetes.

Among those surveyed for the Erie County Community Health Assessment (CHA) 2022-24 [9] who identified a factor that might have contributed to their success in breastfeeding for a longer period, workplace support was cited by 25.3% of respondents as influential in their decision to breastfeed. Erie County employers should create or revise existing employee lactation policies that are inclusive of any employee that has the right to access breastfeeding, chestfeeding, and lactation services in reference to New York State Labor Law Section 206-c. This law guarantees breastfeeding employees the right to pump milk at work for three years after the birth of a child. The language used in lactation policies is often not inclusive of all employees who may be lactating in the workplace and have the right to access breastfeeding, chestfeeding, and lactation services under Labor Law Section 206-c. Not all lactating employees are moms, women, or have given birth.

Creating or updating workplace lactation policies using inclusive language promotes equity in the workplace and prevents an employer from misrepresenting an employee. It can also impact health outcomes for employees and their families directly and by addressing Economic Stability and Social and Community Context as SDOH.